
Countering Child Suicide Bombers:

Interview With Brooke Goldstein

Interviewed By John Whisenhunt, Editor

Editorial Abstract: Human rights attorney Brooke Goldstein produced the recent film “*The Making of a Martyr*,” a documentary addressing use of children as suicide bombers in the Palestinian Territories. Goldstein describes her field experiences and findings, examining the extensive social & cultural influences that enable child recruitment.

IO Sphere: Social networking and family influence are perhaps the most powerful tools extremists possess. How are they corrupting young people into becoming bombers?

BG: There are several factors that are influencing young, impressionable Palestinian children to become suicide-homicide bombers. Incitement to hate and to ‘martyr’ themselves is coming at these children from all directions. First of all you have state-run television, radio and print media that broadcast children’s programming with messages of hate and death. These programs are aimed at children as young as the pre-school age and come in the form of cartoons, music videos, talk shows, puppets, and adults dressed up as Mickey Mouse-like characters teaching children to violently kill themselves for the sake of Allah and jihad. The shows depict a fairy-tale paradise complete with amusement parks, candy and toys. Palestinian schools, as well as schools run by the UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency] hire teachers straight off the Hamas payroll, hang martyr posters on classroom walls and use textbooks that deny Israel’s right to exist, as well as objectify Jews and all infidels as subhuman creatures. Itamar Marcus has examples of this on his website, *Palestinian Media Watch*. Often, parents have gone on record stating they encourage their children to become suicide bombers and families of those ‘martyred’ receive cash payments from banks such as the Arab Bank, while they are revered, celebrated and honored by their community. The culture of martyrdom is inescapable when you live in the West Bank or Gaza. Adults and children who become suicide bombers

are hailed as heroes and role models for children to emulate, schools and summer camps are named in their honor.

On top of it all, terrorist groups such as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the Islamic Jihad and Hamas, who have each openly declared responsibility for recruiting children as suicide bombers, patrol the streets for their child victims. Children are being picked up, literally, from the classroom and sent out with



(Fox News)

explosives in under 48 hours! Some of the children that are preyed upon are those who have, for one reason or another, been marginalized. For example, Hussam Abdu, the main character of my film, was a fifteen year old, physically a dwarf, and therefore considered to be mentally handicapped child. He was convinced by the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades that he would become popular and famous if he blew himself up. Al-Aqsa used two of Hussam’s fifth grade classmates—each paid 100 dollars—to recruit him. Fortunately, Hussam was smart enough to turn himself in. Unfortunately, he has been tried and convicted of attempted murder and is now serving out an eight year sentence in an Israeli prison.

I want to make clear, that the child suicide bomber is as much a victim of a crime as are the innocent civilians killed in his or her explosive wake. This child does not have the malicious intent required to convict him of murder. These children are victims of the most egregious human right violation, the premeditated murder of ones own children. The incitement and recruitment of Palestinian children to become suicide bombers is grossly illegal, it is state sponsored mass infanticide and frankly, the practice is a form of societal suicide completely unprecedented in recorded human history.

Palestinian children are not doing this of their own free will, nor are they doing this for political reasons. It was not out of desperation, but aspiration to become heroes, to become famous, to have sex with virgins, to go to paradise. For us suicide bombing is still abhorrent; for these children it’s like eating french fries. They literally don’t understand that you die when you blow your limbs apart, there is a mental disconnect there; death is not martyrdom. It’s like becoming a rock star overnight.

Also, this phenomenon is spreading beyond the West Bank and Gaza. We are now seeing child suicide bombing in areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Children are being educated in Pakistani mosques, are kidnapped, sexually and physically abused and then driven across the border by Talibani terrorists for missions in Iraq against not only American soldiers, but also Iraqi citizens, including other children. Afghan President Hamid Karzai is pardoning six year old children recruited by the Taliban for suicide missions and who are told their belt will spray flowers! Some of these children are also voluntarily turning themselves

into the authorities. *Al Manar* network, the Hizballah-run television station, is being broadcast via satellite throughout Europe and has been named as one of the most influential factors in radicalizing European Muslim youth. How much longer will it be until we see a child suicide bomber in London?

IO Sphere: *Say you were building a case as an attorney: who is most culpable for these actions; who do we go after?*

BG: Let's look at that both legally and morally. Who are we going blame? My position is these children are innocent. They don't deserve blame, or jail, or to pay for the crimes of adults who abuse them as political pawns. According to international law, customary law, and morality, children under the age of eighteen are juveniles. They're innocents, and they don't have the maturity or capacity comprehend the gravity of these situations, to weigh the value of their own life against the political impact of a suicide attack—so the last thing we want to do is blame the children for this phenomenon. The children are the victims, this is clear. Obviously those culpable are the adults who recruit and physically put bombs around children's waists, drive them to checkpoints, and either instruct the children to blow themselves up or detonate them by remote control. So there's culpability with these terrorists, but the chances of going to the West Bank or Gaza and handcuffing them, then hauling them to some international court are slim.

What about the parents? Why aren't the parents teaching their children to be safe, to love life, to seek a future? Even if they do, that message is directly contradicted by everything the children see on TV, everything they learn at school, from the Internet, even by the sticker albums they're given! When I was in the West Bank in 2004, the fad was sticker albums, where you have heads of martyrs and you place them in different settings, like on a cloud in heaven... collect all twenty of the most recent suicide bombers! Who in their right mind is printing those? They too are

responsible. The chief programmer at *PA TV*, whom I interviewed in my film, is directly responsible for incitement to mass murder Palestinian children by airing inciteful cartoons and programming. The Palestinian Authority, Hamas, other state governments like Iran, state banks in Arab countries that financially support the families of suicide bombers, all play a role. And charities who donate to Hamas, knowing they recruit children are also responsible... they need to put conditions on their money, or just donate decent textbooks. So what we have is a complex problem where martyrdom is ingrained in the culture of the Palestinians and is supported ideologically and financially by various outside sources.

The first step, at least, must be for the UN, international organizations and human rights organizations to outright condemn this practice. To date, the UN has issued hundreds of resolutions condemning Israel for alleged human rights violations, yet it has issued not one denouncing child suicide bombing as a crime against humanity. Those who claim to be the protectors of Palestinian children, those who toil to expose the alleged human rights violations against them by Israel, surely they must be outraged by the intentional murder of these children by their own community! Can you imagine what would happen if any western state strapped bombs on horses or dogs and sent out those animals to detonate amongst civilian populations? There would be deafening outcry amongst animal rights groups, and rightly so! But when it comes to the use of Muslim children in this manner, no one is screaming out! Why?

Second, the western media needs to start reporting accurately on events in the Middle East. Rarely does the media mention the age and origin of a Palestinian, Iraqi or Afghani suicide bomber, and this is leading many to dangerous misconceptions about why we have suicide bombing in the first place. For, a six-year-old child kidnapped and forced to become a suicide bomber is not doing it for the same reasons as a 26-year-old local does. Public awareness must be raised and fruitful debate must begin about this crime against children

because ignoring it is sending the message that we don't care or that we condone the activity, and the longer we are silent, the longer this practice will continue. Special prosecutors at the UN and at the Hague should take these cases on and attorneys should be motivated to lobby for the application of international human rights law in other international and national courts of law. But ultimately, change must come from within the Muslim community itself. Moderate Muslim parents must speak out against the indoctrination and recruitment of their own children. Terrorists are very aware of the hearts and minds battle, and if they see that they are losing support within the Muslim community, maybe they will cease this practice.

IO Sphere: *Let's talk about making the film. Here you are, a young, educated western woman, and in the eyes of these folks you're the wrong faith... the deck is stacked against you walking into that environment. But if you can talk to these people, is there hope for other dialog with extremists?*

BG: The people I interviewed had no qualms, and were very happy to talk about their practices, because from their point of view, they are doing God's work. The fact that they were willing to talk to me, however, doesn't mean that they are reasonable or humanitarian people. After all, we were talking openly about how they recruit and kill children in suicide attacks. As for me, a woman without any real protection, and kind of naïve...yes that was very frivolous of me. But I did not want to make a film that was full of hearsay, I wanted to get confessions from the perpetrators mouths themselves and they indeed hung themselves without the need for a didactic narrative condemnation. No one asked about my background or about my beliefs, they were just interested that Brooke from Canada had a TV camera. And they opened up. The Palestinian territories are very used to journalists; Gaza and the West Bank have got to be two of the most covered areas in the entire world. I don't know how it compares to Iraq right now, but

journalists are all over. So all we did was take some tape and mark "TV" on the side of our Jeep, and drive through the camps. Everyone would come up and say "ah, television... where are you from?" We'd reply "Canada," and that was all it took. What can I say, they liked to be on TV.

IO Sphere: *If you hadn't been able to offer that, do you feel they would they have been as receptive?*

BG: I think so. People are happy to talk with an individual. They were happy to sit with me just like I'm happy to talk with you. Maybe there's a bit of selfishness, and they wanted a little fame. Zakaria Zubeidi of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades—the most wanted man in the West Bank—survivor of five assassination attempts, regularly talks to the media. That's the whole strategy with these guys. Again, here's the fame element of wanting to become a 'star' militant, and wanting to be recognized. They know they're not here on the planet for long—a lot of the people we interviewed are now dead. There's a scene where I'm interviewing five masked gunmen and three of them are no longer around. Catch your fifteen minutes while you can. They had a moment to say "Look at us, we're ruthless... we're making a statement here." That statement being "we recruit children as young as ten years old," for suicide attacks.

IO Sphere: *North America is full of talented folks who can create messages like your film. How do we get media and government together as creative talent?*

BG: I think our government needs to support our independent journalists and filmmakers—whether through monetary or logistical support, or a research base—because it's very important for the American government to get the truth out there. This is as much a propaganda war as it is a physical battle, and frankly, we can't afford to lose the propaganda war. The media as we know it does a very poor job of reporting, especially when

it comes to the root causes of suicide bombing, which is largely a product of hate education. As I referenced in my talk earlier, since 2000 one of every five suicide bombers in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been aged eighteen and under. That's a number you're probably not going to find unless you do a whole slew of research, or talk to me... and why is our media not reporting the facts properly? Because a fifteen year old handicapped suicide bomber recruited against his own will does not fall into their version of the adult Palestinian suicide bomber frustrated with the 'occupation,' and driven to suicide because of desperation. So, I think the government should support independent filmmakers and truth tellers risking their lives in war zones.

IO Sphere: *In building messages we're trying to find people who can work both the softer artistic side, and the harder tech side. What advice would you give someone who wanted to be like you—an advocate and a filmmaker?*

BG: Obviously as a filmmaker you're going in with a goal, and you have to choose a good subject. And you have to take maybe eighty hours of footage and edit it down to sixty minutes of compelling human-interest stories. Most importantly, you can't approach your topic didactically; you have to trust your audience. They're smart, give them the truth. They will, they should, and they must come to the right conclusion. What we tried to show in "The Making of a Martyr," was the experience of Palestinian children and the attitudes of their community straight from the mouths of the perpetrators and the victims themselves. Through their stories, without a bunch of 'talking heads,' our audience must come to their own conclusions: do they or do they not support this activity? Regardless of where they stand politically, regardless of whether they are right or left, pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli, do they advocate the murder of Palestinian children in this manner? Child suicide bombing is a subject with a clear truth, one that does not need to be 'spun' or

'packaged.' Children are innocent, they don't deserve to die, they don't deserve to be taught to kill themselves, and they don't deserve to be killed by remote control suicide belt detonation! If you present this accurately, I think everyone will agree. But if you're going to be a filmmaker, that doesn't always mean objectivity—I think that's overrated. As filmmaker and as a journalist you should, and sometimes you must, take a position. And it should be a result of the research you accumulate. Your audience should come to the same conclusion when you show them the results of your entire research—the accurate information you collected, and the unedited words of your interview subjects. I didn't have to spin this story: my interviewees told me 'straight up' they recruit kids. I let them speak for themselves, and let the audience condemn them on their own accord. Show people something they don't have the opportunity to see firsthand. Documentary filmmakers should not feel the need to be objective to the point where if a message starts coming through in the film, they have to actively seek out someone who contradicts that message. We did about eighty-one hours of interviews, and an overwhelming message emerged. I didn't go out to find an armchair philosopher to contradict the evidence that is clear and out in the open. There's a disease of political correctness that says you're biased if you take a side, and that's simply untrue.

There is a part in the film where we show people who are clearly denying facts. And when your interview subject is lying, and you know that, then you have a responsibility to your audience to show that he is lying. And ideally you will do this not through insulting narrative, but by presenting evidence of their betrayal to your audience. We interviewed Yayha Barakat, chief programmer at *PA TV*, and asked him "do your programs incite violence?" He said, "absolutely not, we don't incite violence." Dispersed throughout his interview we inserted clips from *PA TV*, and without saying anything we just showed the clips. Our audience can see for themselves he is lying—no one had to tell them, because it

was evident from the clips themselves.

IO Sphere: *Let's shift gears a bit. As an attorney and an advocate, and given current international law, how do we fight this problem from a legal standpoint?*

BG: There's a problem. We have international law that is clearly codified, widely ratified treaties, and conventions on the rights of children, the United Nations Charter: the laws exist. The problem is that they're not being enforced. Why? Issues of jurisdiction, problems of state sovereignty, problems of biased courts, problems of special prosecutors who don't want to take this up. Then there's non-recognition of international law: people simply think these laws don't apply to them. Finally, there's no motivation on the part of attorneys to spend their time; take the pro bono hours, travel to the war zones, collect the depositions... when you could be working for a top firm in New York instead. I mean, here I am with a degree in human rights law, and sometimes it seems useless! So to collect data on human rights violations, I had to make a documentary film. The only hope I see for enforcement of international law is raising public awareness, sparking public debate, and people becoming appalled enough to get their elected representatives to take up the issues with places like the UN. Countries like the US, Canada, France, Germany—all democratic countries that are party to the UN—need to pressure the special prosecutors of the international courts, set up special courts, and expand the jurisdiction of their national courts to allow for the civil and criminal prosecution of these crimes. Someone needs to start pressuring The Hague to add these cases to their dockets.

Moreover, we need to start using the right legal language. Al-Aqsa is not militant, they are criminal terrorists. They are child abusers. They are child murderers and the Palestinian Authority is complicit in these crimes. What's happening in the West Bank to Palestinian children at the hands of their own society isn't lawful resistance: it is

illegal. Yet we can't even come up with a clear [legal] definition of terrorism; that's ridiculous! We need to define it within ourselves 'what is terrorism?' Certainly the base line definition is the intentional murder of innocent (civilian) children at the hands of their own state and state-sponsored institutions and militant groups for intimidation and political purposes. This is exactly what is going on, and if the world can't come to a consensus, Muslims and non-Muslims, left and right alike, that it is wrong to kill a child, then our civilization has come to a very low point.

IO Sphere: *You've had some significant experiences in researching and making the film. Is there any one thing that really stands out?*

BG: A couple of things stand out. One is the role that drugs play: children are given hashish prior to going out on these suicide attacks. That's how they numb the children, and get them 'woozy' and willing to commit suicide. The Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades actually gave us blocks of hash as a gift for interviewing them, as if it were some sort of honor. What Palestinian children need is rehabilitation, a re-education because of what they have and are still going through. We also need to support Palestinian parents who are willing to speak out against this practice because the standard so far is violent intimidation against anyone who speaks out against

the Intifada. Zacharia Zubeidi told me that if any parent opposed him, he would publicly accuse them of collaborating with the Israelis and deal with them accordingly. Now I just find it hard to believe that the majority of Palestinian parents willingly advocate the death of their own children. The Palestinian society is being held hostage by a lunatic fringe that is becoming larger and stronger every day to the extent that it is becoming the new mainstream.

IO Sphere: *And you spent time with that fringe. That takes some guts.*

BG: Oh, I was young and naïve! You can't condemn or praise a society until you've met them, and researched their ways. I wouldn't have any credibility to take up this issue unless I knew what I was talking about, firsthand. Why should anyone listen to me? It turned out to be much worse than I expected. And to the point of this seminar, this is something we can come to consensus on—with our enemies even—it doesn't matter where you stand in the socio-political spectrum!

IO Sphere: *That's quite a message. Thank you for sharing these incredible and disturbing experiences.*

BG: This has been a very worthwhile experience and I'm very glad to have been a part of it. Thank you. 🕒